



Fish Contamination Survey in Southern California

Survey of Chemical Contaminants in Subsistence and Sport Fish from Los Angeles, Ventura and Orange Counties

FAQs:

What is this project?

A group of government agencies is collaborating to survey chemical contamination in local marine fish that are commonly caught by subsistence and sport anglers. In addition, we will survey contaminant levels in white croaker in the vicinity of the commercial catch ban area.

What government agencies are doing this survey?

These are Federal and State natural resource agencies headed by NOAA (the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) working in collaboration with the U.S. EPA (Environmental Protection Agency). The natural resource agencies have formed a group called the "Montrose Settlements Restoration Program" ("MSRP"), which includes the California Department of Fish and Game, California State Parks, California State Lands Commission, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration ("NOAA"), National Park Service, and US Fish and Wildlife Service. The project is also receiving advice and other assistance from the California Department of Health Services, California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, Southern California Coastal Water Research Project, Santa Monica Bay Restoration Project, L.A. County Sanitation District, and experts at local universities.

When are you doing this?

The fish collection began on August 21st and will end around November 1st, depending on weather and other conditions that affect fishing. Chemical analysis of the fish will take about 6 months after that.

What fish will you be surveying for contaminants?

We will be catching and analyzing 24 species or groups of fish. Here's the list:

Pacific barracuda	white seabass
chub (Pacific) mackerel	black croaker
Pacific sardine	white croaker
yellowtail	yellowfin croaker
opaleye	jacksmelt
sargo	California corbina
kelp (calico) bass	California halibut
rockfishes	shovelnose guitarfish
California sheephead	queenfish
barred sandbass	surfperches (bottom feeding)
top smelt	surfperches (water column feeding)
halfmoon	California scorpion fish ("sculpin")

- In all, we will be collecting between 3000 and 6000 fish total.
- 435 to 870 of these fish will be white croaker, a species known to be highly contaminated in the L.A. area.

Why did you choose these fish?

A group of experts chose these fish for three reasons:

1. Overall, these are the most common fish caught by subsistence and sport anglers along the Los Angeles coastline.
2. We know, or suspect, that some of these fish are highly contaminated with DDTs and PCBs.
3. We have some evidence that some of these fish are low in contamination and would be good choices for anglers to catch and eat.

What contaminants will you measure?

We will measure the amount of DDTs and PCBs in every fish on the list. In select groups of fish, we will also measure chlordanes, dieldrin, mercury, and arsenic. Depending on results from a study now being conducted by the State of California, we may also measure dioxins.

- All fish will be held in freezers until they go to the laboratory for chemical analysis
- In the first round of laboratory analysis, we will measure chemical contaminants in 1200-1400 fish.
- We will use the results from the first round of analyses to identify which fish, and how many fish, we need to analyze in the second round of analysis. The same will be done for a possible third round.

Why are you measuring these particular chemical contaminants?

The marine environment of Los Angeles County is heavily contaminated with DDTs and PCBs. Studies have already shown that some marine fish are also highly contaminated with these chemicals. In fact, DDT levels in some local fish appear to be the highest found in food fish anywhere in the United States. Since we want to use the contaminant

data for public information and planning purposes, we will also check the fish for other contaminants that may be present.

How much coastline will you cover in this survey--where will you catch these fish?

We will be catching fish at 29 sites along the coast between Ventura and Dana Point. Most of the sites are in Los Angeles County and will include the locations where most anglers fish in L.A. County.

Why are you surveying this section of coastline?

From previous studies, we know the most highly contaminated fish are found between Redondo Beach and Long Beach, including the Palos Verdes area and L.A.-Long Beach Harbors. Based on 1987 data, the State of California issued fish consumption advisories for locations between Malibu and Newport Beach. Contamination may change over time, so we want to determine the coastal pattern of chemical contamination in common sport and subsistence fish at the present time.

Who is actually catching these fish?

The fish collections are being done by Ken Nielsen of Sea Ventures of Dana Point. He is a professional fisherman with 25 years of experience collecting fish for environmental surveys along this coast.

Why is this area of coastline so contaminated?

From the late 1940's until the 1970's, Los Angeles area factories dumped thousands of tons of DDTs and PCBs into the local sewer system, which discharges into the ocean near White Point on the Palos Verdes peninsula. Although these discharges stopped about 30 years ago, more than 100 tons of DDTs and 10 tons of PCBs still remain in the sea bottom sediments near Palos Verdes and in Santa Monica Bay.

Will the public get to see these data?

Yes. The public has the right to know which fish and fishing locations are contaminated. The public also has the right to know which fish and fishing locations are low in contaminants. As soon as the fish are analyzed and the data checked, the government agencies will give the data to the public. It will take a while to analyze this many fish, and the data will probably be ready around May 2003.

How will the government agencies use these data?

The government agencies will use the results of the contaminant survey for projects designed to help protect the public from consuming contaminated fish and to improve fishing for clean fish.

What kind of projects will help protect the public from contaminated fish and restore fishing?

The government agencies are now in the process of choosing and planning these projects, and are seeking suggestions and comments from the public. Basically, the agencies are considering four categories of projects:

- a. Remediation of contaminated sediments. Most of the DDTs and PCBs causing the fish contamination are now coming from the sea bottom sediments of the Palos Verdes Shelf and Santa Monica Bay. US EPA is studying ways to reduce the extent to which these DDTs and PCBs contaminate local the fish.
- b. Health advisories and commercial fishing bans. EPA is working with California State health agencies to examine the existing fish consumption advisories and ban of commercial fishing for white croaker near Palos Verdes.
- c. Public information. MSRP and EPA are collaborating with community organizations and health agencies to give the public information about avoiding contaminated fish and selecting cleaner fish. This would include better signs at fishing locations, more effective educational programs, and better publicity about the fish contamination problems along the coasts of Los Angeles and Orange Counties.
- d. Restoration of fishing for clean fish. MSRP is now examining habitat improvement projects that may be able to decrease the availability of contaminated fish while increasing the abundance clean fish.

Is this the only survey that will be done?

Future surveys of this magnitude will depend on the results of this survey. This survey may show that we need to survey a greater number of fish, more species of fish, or more locations along the coast. Meanwhile, Los Angeles County Sanitation District has been conducting surveys of contamination in certain fish on the Palos Verdes Shelf, and will continue to do so. The State of California and other groups have also been doing surveys of chemical contaminants in local fish. These studies complement each other.

How are you paying for this?

In the course of ten years of litigation, the government agencies of the MSRP, together with US EPA, received more than \$140 million in settlements from the parties responsible for discharging the DDTs and PCBs into our local ocean waters. The agencies are using the settlement monies to pay for this survey and other projects that will help undo the harm caused by this wide scale contamination by DDTs and PCBs.

I ate a fish from this area last week. Do I have to worry about getting sick?

As far as anyone knows right now, you probably cannot get sick from eating just a few of the local contaminated fish. Experts in this field think the real risk is from regularly eating the local contaminated fish over a long period of time. Results of animal studies and accidental poisonings of people indicate DDTs and PCBs may cause increased risk of cancer and developmental problems in babies and children.